



## Wal-Mart upgrades in Rayville

### City prepares for new Supercenter, hopes business development increases

By Greg Hilburn

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Rayville Mayor Harry Lewis said he believes the town's new 100,000-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter will be a catalyst for more retail development.

"When we get that store open others are going to follow," Lewis said. "It gives other developers the confidence to invest in our community."

The new Wal-Mart at 1806 S. Julia St., opens at 8 a.m. Wednesday.

It will be one of five Wal-Mart Supercenters opening in northeastern Louisiana this fall. A new store opened in Oak Grove earlier this month, while another opens in Farmerville at 8 a.m. Wednesday and store openings are scheduled in November in Bastrop and Vidalia.

"Any town that gets a (Wal-Mart Supercenter) usually benefits from other retail development," said Jonathan Walker of Stirling Properties of Baton Rouge.

Stirling Properties is marketing four of the northeastern Louisiana buildings Wal-Mart is vacating for the new Supercenters.

Walker, who has a potential client for the old Wal-Mart building in Rayville, said retail developments he called "shadow centers" often develop near Wal-Mart Supercenters.

"The retailer I'm working with now probably wouldn't consider Rayville if it didn't have this (Supercenter)," Walker said.

Most of the new stores are double the size of the previous Wal-Marts and typically employ as many as 200 workers compared to about 100 employees at the smaller stores.

"They're definitely an upgrade," said Rayville Wal-Mart Supercenter director Ronnie Ashmore, who has opened three such Supercenters for the company. "It's exciting for us and for the community."

However, there are still people like Silas Williams of Rayville who believe that Wal-Mart destroys hometown businesses. "It's definitely hurts the mom-and-pop stores," Williams said. "I've seen it happen before."

But others, like Robert Bracy who was having lunch with Williams at the Feed Lot in Rayville, see advantages.

"I have two daughters who work there, so it keeps my girls out of my pocket," Bracy said, smiling.

Lewis said Wal-Mart officials have also told him that the Supercenter could generate \$300,000 in annual tax revenue for the city.

"It helps us provide services," Lewis said.

The Rev. James Smith, Rayville's economic development officer, believes Wal-Mart will create a retail corridor that will keep local residents from going elsewhere to shop.

"The (state) Department of Transportation and Development told us that there are 70,000 cars that pass by every day," Smith said. "We need to give them a reason to stop."